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ABSTRACT

Nursing, as a profession dealing with the health care system, places considerable emphasis on empathy, i.e., responsiveness to the feelings of another. To investigate whether individual differences in empathy are reflected in freshmen nursing students' scores on the Paired Hands Test (PHT), which measures the construct of the "others' concept," it was hypothesized that students rated high in empathy by clinical instructors would have high PHT scores and students rated in low in empathy by clinical instructors would have low PHT scores. Freshmen nursing students (N=33) completed the PHT, and ratings of empathy were obtained from their instructors. Results showed that scores on the PHT were related to ratings of empathy by instructors, but that the relationship was more pronounced for lower scores than higher scores. Findings suggest that the PHT might be considered another helpful instrument for predicting certain personality characteristics inluding sensitivity to others' feelings and, as such, may be a helpful index for research and, possibly, for admission decisions. (PAS)

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OTHERS-CONCEPT INFORMATION AND RATINGS OF EMPATHY BY INSTRUCTORS

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OTHERS-CONCEPT INFORMATION AND RATINGS OF EMPATHY BY INSTRUCTORS

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The importance of empathy for people in professions dealing with health delivery services has long been stressed, (Rogers, 1965). Nursing, as a profession dealing with the health care system, has placed considerable emphasis on empathy (LaMonica, Carew, Winder, Haase, & Blanchard, 1976). In broad sense, "empathy refers to responsiveness of an individual to the feelings of another person" (Iannotti, 1975). The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the assumption that empathic understanding of others' feelings is important in the nursing profession and it is emphasized in the professional training.

Other factors also are known to be related to empathy (Staub, 1978) hence individual differences will exist. The basic question was how much of these differences if any could be reflected in the nursing students scores, on the Paired Hands Test (PHT) which has shown to be measuring the construct of the "others' concept" (Zucker K., 1976) at the start of their professional training. Hence, two hypothesis were proposed.

1. Students with high ratings of empathy by their clinical instructors would have high PHT scores.
2. Students with low ratings of empathy by their instructors would have low PHT scores.

Method

The data for this study came from an on-going research of students admitted to the nursing program at Indiana State University. These data were collected between January 1980 and May 1982.

Subjects: A total of 33 students who were admitted to the nursing program during the past two years and met the criteria (which are listed in the procedure section) and served as subjects for this study. All were Caucasian female, freshman students.

Procedure: At the beginning of the semester the students were contacted and individual appointments for a testing session were made for each of them. Each student was individually interviewed during this session, and the Paired

Hands Test (PHT) was administered. At the end of the semester two ratings of empathy were obtained from two instructors who had worked closely with the students in a clinical nursing course for at least one semester. The instructors were told to consider empathy as "the ability to feel the same as someone else feels," and to rate the students on a 5-point scale. The average of the ratings from the two instructors was used as an index of empathy for each student.

Results

The average ratings on empathy ranged from 1 to 5. These average ratings were arranged from highest (5) to lowest (1). Comparisons were made on the PHT scores of the students who fell in the upper half of the group with those who fell in the lower half (median split) on empathy ratings. On the PHT photographs scores of 1, 2, and 3 were considered low; the score of 4 was considered neutral; and scores of 5, 6, and 7 were considered high. Table 1 shows the distribution of PHT scores for the two groups on empathy ratings.

Table 1

Comparison of PHT Scores of the Students in the Two Halves of Ratings of Empathy (median split)

	PHT Scores	
	1, 2, 3	5, 6, 7
Upper half	61	205
Lower half	87	185

The Chi square test was run and results show that the students who were rated high on empathy by their instructors obtained significantly fewer scores of 1, 2, and 3 on their PHT photographs than students who were rated lower on empathy, whereas the later group obtained fewer scores of 5, 6, and 7 on their PHT photographs than the former group ($\chi^2 = 5.37$, $p < .05$). While the overall comparison of the two groups shows that their scores on the PHT are related to their ratings of empathy, a closer examination of the data reveals that this relationship is more pronounced for lower scores than higher scores between the two groups. For example, when comparing the PHT scores of the upper third of empathy ratings with the lower third, the upper third had only 9 scores of 1 and 2 whereas the lower third had 17. When we add the scores of 3 to lows and the scores of 5 to highs we see that the upper third had 36 scores of 1, 2, and 3 whereas the lower third had 52. These differences are not as pronounced for high scores on PHT photographs as Table 2 shows.

Table 2

Comparison of PHT Scores of Students in the Upper Third with Those in the Lower Third of Empathy Ratings

		PHT Scores: 1, 2, 3	PHT Scores: 5, 6, 7
Empathy Ratings	Upper third	36	129
	Lower third	52	117

One possible explanation for this observation is that although there are individual differences among nursing students, as a group they are more homogeneous and after at least one semester of professional clinical training they become more sensitive to others and consequently the range of individual differences has narrowed. Of course there are other possible explanations as well, e.g., the narrow range of the empathy RATINGS (1 to 5), or social desirability factors which might show on PHT score but not on the ratings of empathy. Another possibility is that those on the lower end of the PHT scores are more sensitive to nuances of the correlates than those on the higher end. This has been shown in other studies (Fetz, 1982).

As was stated earlier, these are preliminary findings of data on an on-going research project. The scores on the PHT so far have shown some relationship with clinical observation of the instructors. If this trend continues, the PHT might be considered another helpful instrument for predicting certain personality characteristics including sensitivity to others' feelings and as such a helpful index for research and possibly for admission decisions.

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